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South India 1770–1840: The Colonial Transition

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Readers in the historiography of colonial south India have every reason to feel puzzled by the answers available to even the most straightforward of questions. Was the colonial conquest achieved through the imposition of 'superior' European arms, technology and ideology or was it more in the nature of an internal subversion of the pre-existing Indian state system? Did British rule fundamentally alter the structures of South Indian society or did it rest lightly on top of pre-existing structures and serve to sustain established elites? Did it undermine the hold of 'indigenous' cultures on society or did it merely scratch their surface or even did it promote their revival?

The historical literature is divided on all of these issues. At one extreme appears to stand Robert Frykenberg for whom the 'colonial' nature of the relationship between Britain and India is, itself, open to doubt. For Frykenberg, the early Company state—Company *Circari*—broadly followed Indian precedent and, even when it attempted to be more assertive (especially with regard to Christianity), tended to be overcome by independent and local initiatives.[1] At the other extreme might be said to stand Prasannan Parthasarathi who, focusing on the relations of production, notes a profound transformation taking place very early in the colonial period as the textile industry fell under the domination of a European-directed global capitalism.[2] And, in between, there are a series of other perspectives which, while noting forces of change, leave it somewhat unclear whence these came, where they were going and how far 'colonialism'—rather than other factors—might have been responsible for them.

[1] Robert E. Frykenberg, 'Company Circari in the Carnatic, c.1799–1859' in Richard. G. Fox (ed.), *Realm and Region in Traditional India* (Durham, 1977); 'On the Study of Conversion Movements', *Indian Economic and Social Review*, XVII:2 (1981), pp. 121–38; 'Modern Education in South India 1754–1854', *American Historical Review*, 96:1 (1988), pp. 37–65.

[2] Prasannan Parthasarathi, *The Transition to a Colonial Economy* (Cambridge, 2001).

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David Ludden's *Peasant History in South India*, for example, emphasizes evolutionary rather than revolutionary change and highlights the role of South India's peasants in the making of their own history. British rule follows on from Nayak rule, picking up many of its tendencies but developing them in distinctive ways whose success (or failure) appears determined at least as much by 'the peasants' themselves. History from the peasant point of view is almost seamless and colonial rule—rather than transformational and epochal—provides just another chapter in it.[3] Similarly, Pamela Price's emphasis in her study of Indian kingship in Ramnad falls more on continuity than change. Even though, plainly, colonial rule undermined many of the functions of Indian kings, nonetheless in Ramnad the ruling family struggled on to try to preserve its dignities and prerogatives.[4]

By contrast, other historians have been concerned to read South India's experience more in terms of the novelties introduced by colonial rule. However, their understandings of its impact vary considerably. Eugene Irschick, for example, suggests the centrality of a 'dialogue' between Britons and South Indians out of which new constructions of 'Tamil society' came to be forged. He emphasizes the pluralism and openness of the intellectual exchanges involved in this dialogue, whose products he sees embodying convergent ideologies—particularly on the value of settlement and 'cultivation'.[5]

However, Nicholas Dirks and Arjun Appadurai prefer to highlight the asymmetries in power between Britons and South Indians and the cultural dissonance created by colonial rule—which, in Dirks' case, is associated with epistemic 'violence' or 'rupture'.[6] For Dirks, a key function of colonial rule was to undermine the effective authority of Indian kingship (especially as embodied in the *palaiyakkarrar* or 'little king'), which he takes as central to the pre-colonial social system. Indian crowns were rendered 'hollow' and their powers became largely ceremonial.[7] Equally, Appadurai sees the intervention of colonial law in the Hindu temple decisively altering a system of social relations, which had been dynamic and fluid.[8] For both, the paradoxical consequence of the intervention of European 'modernity'

[3] David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985).
[4] Pamela G. Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1996).
[5] Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and History* (California, 1994).
[6] Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind* (Princeton, 2001).
[7] Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown* (Cambridge, 1987).
[8] Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule* (Cambridge, 1981).

was to create in South India a far more rigid, static and hierarchic society than existed before. This was particularly so because the (mis-)understanding of South Indian society possessed by the British derived from Brahmanic scripture as re-worked through European-inspired institutional structures and emphasized caste to the exclusion of other forms of social relationship and cultural idiom.

From these diverse perspectives, then, South India's history in the early colonial period might be represented as anything (and everything) from profound continuity to radical dislocation. Moreover, each representation is attended by questions no less puzzling. If, indeed, the British were simply part of the Southern landscape—trapped by its contours and pitfalls—how did they come to effect 'Empire' over it in the first place or at all? But, equally, if they did transform its society, what means and mechanisms did they use? And, also, why precisely should the assumed-Modernity of their own civilization have produced, in this colonial context, a perverse form of caste-based Traditionalism?

In this paper, I want to explore the various differences and paradoxes manifested in these several interpretations. My purpose is not to suggest that any of them is necessarily 'false': indeed, I hope to show that they are all insightful of South India's complex history. Rather, I would like to suggest that, to understand them and their different inflections, it may be necessary to consider some broader features of the context, which have tended to be neglected, and also to raise some general questions about the concepts through which, and the assumptions on which, the history of the South in the period 1770–1840 has been written.

Colonialism: Problems of a Concept

A first issue—especially in these 'post-colonial' times—concerns the provenance of the concept of 'colonialism', where structuralist paradigms and teleological proclivities have cast a long shadow over historical understanding. Colonialism combines cultural difference with a-symmetry of power and, most obviously, achieved its paradigmatic expression in the Age of Empire, between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, when the military, economic and scientific domination of western over non-western societies reached extraordinary levels and was buttressed by self-conscious ideologies of racial 'difference'. But how far is it historically legitimate to read the

characteristics of this period back into earlier phases of the long relationship between Europe and India? Indeed, how far is it legitimate even to construe these earlier phases largely for traces, elements or antecedents of their subsequent condition—which thereby appears as immanent in them?

Unfortunately, a great deal of the historiography of early 'colonial' India has suffered from this teleology. Few scholars now, perhaps, would share the belief of the nationalist historian K. M. Pannikar that India's decline began at the moment that Vasco da Gama set foot on Indian soil in 1498. But some, most notably Gauri Viswanathan, would see it proper to treat the case of Elihu Yale as paradigmatic of both Indian colonialism and British global imperialism.[9] However, when Yale was being investigated for murder in the Company's Madras in the 1690s, it is not clear what colonial empire the British might be thought to have had in India; nor what imperial power the handful of English traders, whom he briefly 'governed', might have been able to muster against the forces of Aurangzeb's then-conquering armies.

But even within the epoch of formal East India Company rule, itself, there are many problems. Ranajit Guha may have made a valiant effort to find, in the Bengal Permanent Settlement of 1793, the beacon to an epoch of private property rights and unfettered market capitalism.[10] However, it plainly bedazzled his reading of the Permanent Settlement's text: which held that, whatever rights it might be thought to create, none should be treated as overriding pre-existing 'custom'.[11] Equally, Sudipta Sen may have claimed to find in the discourse of the English East India Company in the 1760s and 1770s elements of the ideologies of both 'free trade' and modern state regulation.[12] But it would need to be explained, then, why the policies of the Company—a royal chartered monopoly company—were so resolutely geared for the next fifty years to driving out all competitors from the markets in which it dealt; and why, indeed, it struggled for almost as long to impose any kind of regulation on the 'corrupt' activities of its own servants. Or again, Ron Inden may have seen in the ideas informing James Tod's celebrated analysis of

[9] Gauri Viswanathan, 'Yale College and the Culture of British Imperialism', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 7 (1994), pp. 1–30.

[10] Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal* (Paris, 1963).

[11] Jon Wilson,'Governing Property, Making Law: Land, Local Society and Colonial Discourse in Agrarian Bengal, c.1785–1830', D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford University, 2000.

[12] Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade* (Philadelphia, 1998).

Rajasthan, published in 1834, lineages of the race ideology of the late nineteenth century.[13] But, as Norbert Peabody has pointed out, this would seem to have been at the expense of him considering the framework of Tod's own early nineteenth-century nationalist ideology: which illuminates far better the distinctions which he drew between different kinds of 'Indians', regarding some as superior to certain kinds of 'Europeans'.[14]

In effect, reading the early history of British India 'backwards' from its subsequent outcomes leaves very large parts of it obscure and anomalous. From the perspective of the binary race theories of the later colonial age, for example, exactly why should the East India Company state—almost at the moment of its birth—have generated a theory of race/culture/history presupposing the common origins of both 'coloniser' and 'colonised': the Aryan theory of race?[15] No less curious (and perhaps even more fateful) was its decision to rule and legally arbitrate its Empire by India's own laws and customs rather than any imported from a supposedly 'superior' Europe. This is the more so because it was a decision informed not only by an atavistic conservatism, resistant to changing any 'tradition', but also by the most radical Enlightenment opinion of its day. Adam Smith placed 'India' alongside Britain at the highest stage of civilization, a 'commercial society' already possessed of all it would need economically (if, under the East India Company, very much not politically) to prosper.[16] His views found strong endorsement from the likes of William Robertson, doyen of the later Scottish Enlightenment, who even claimed to see in Indian culture a logic directing Indian society towards its own 'improvement'.[17]

In South India, these 'anomalies' were particularly marked. As Burton Stein and Eugene Irschick have argued, the discourse of early Company rule was both resolutely historicist and inclined to privilege 'the local' over the metropolitan and the imperial.[18] It sought to 'settle'

[13] Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990).

[14] Norbert Peabody, 'Tod's Rajast'han and the Boundaries of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-century India', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXX:1 (1996), pp. 185–220.

[15] Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Delhi, 1997).

[16] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1950 ed.), Book 1: Part 3; Book IV: Part 3.

[17] William Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge* . . . (London, 1791).

[18] Irschick, *Dialogue*; Burton Stein, *Sir Thomas Munro: The Colonial State and his Vision of Empire* (Delhi, 1989).

South Indian society on the basis of its own history and traditions and the principal debates within it, which could be extremely fierce, turned on different views of what, precisely, that history and tradition had been. It also strenuously resisted efforts to draw the South into any uniform or homogenized version of 'India'; and its leading statesmen persistently advocated the superiority of 'native' over European agency in its forms of governance.

Reform impulses emanating from London tended to be given very short shrift. James Mill's *History of India*—often taken to have reset the discourse of colonialism in India—was openly ridiculed in the *Edinburgh Review* by an 'Old India Hand',[19] thought to have been Sir Thomas Munro (Madras' leading 'civilian'), and, apart from the brief and unhappy governorship of William Bentinck, which coincided with the Vellore Mutiny, it is difficult to find anyone with sympathy for Mill's ideas in the higher offices of Fort St George. Nor, at least before the mid-century administration of Lord Tweedale, did the Evangelical missionaries, released by the Charter Act of 1813, fair very much better. They may have made some impact on the traditions of Euro-Indian education, long established in the South,[20] but their most cherished project—to force the state to withdraw from the Hindu temples—faced open opposition and backroom conspiracy for more than thirty years; and was eventually dissembled into the law courts.[21] As Christopher Bayly has noted, the rhetoric of the early Company state in Madras—especially under Sir Thomas Munro—was suffused with a species of 'Southern' patriotism: rooting the legitimacy of rule in Southern custom and defying London and Calcutta to change it.[22]

Other features of Madras, anomalous in the context of a latter-day 'colonialism', come from the texture of its social relationships, especially those between Indians and Europeans. The rise of the Company state at the end of the eighteenth century undoubtedly enhanced the power (and arrogance) of 'the British'. However, this did not give rise to a simple racial bifurcation. For example, the historicist orientation of the state—basing itself on Southern custom and tradition—generated a crucial need for local 'knowledge', which Europeans often found difficulty in acquiring. This, in turn, created a

[19] Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings* (Oxford, 1992).
[20] Frykenberg, 'Modern Education'.
[21] Franklin Presler, *Religion under Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, 1987)
[22] C. A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (Delhi, 1998), p. 51.

major 'knowledge' industry in which Indian 'experts' often could aspire to transcend the role of mere 'informants'. As Eugene Irschick and Thomas Trautmann have seen, intellectual relations between Indians and Europeans sometimes give the appearance of debates between fellow scholars.[23]

Nor were these relations just confined to the recovery of the South's own culture and history. Long exposure to European ideas gave rise to many other forms of cross-cultural dialogue—which could be positively evaluated by Europeans themselves, even in the metropolis. Most remarkable here was the great Maratha court at Thanjavur, which was in contact with a 'German' Lutheran mission from the early eighteenth century. The court was noted for its engagement with Enlightenment science, specifically astronomy, and, in the early nineteenth century, Raja Serfoji became strongly interested in architecture. Famously, he designed a tower syncretically blending European and Indian ideas. While, by the 1860s, James Fergusson was to show the new temper of the 'colonial' age by deriding the tower as a monstrous hybrid, it is clear that an earlier generation of Britons still viewed aesthetics differently. In 1834, Serfoji was invited to be founding honorary member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, then forming in London.[24]

Local economic and political relations also etched out curious patterns where British sensibilities of race were cross-cut by countervailing sensitivities to the hierarchies of class and gender. Julia Maitland, the wife of a British magistrate writing in the 1830s, might disparage the 'Blackies' who cringe 'to us English as if they were dirt under our feet' and despair of another Englishman living with a 'half-caste wife and sickly nigger-looking child'. But she found 'the rudeness and contempt' with which some British army officers 'treat[ed] the natives quite painful to witness' and, when introduced into high society, she was awe-struck by 'the upper classes [who] are exceedingly well bred and many are the descendants of native princes'.[25] Both Viscount Valentia and James Wathen, on their journeys through Madras in the 1810s, also commented on the 'soiree'

[23] Irschick, *Dialogue*; Thomas R. Trautmann, 'Hullaballoo about Telugu', *South Asia Research*, 19:1 (1998), pp. 53–70.

[24] Shanti Jayawardene-Pillai, 'Greeks, Saracens and Indians: Imperial Builders in Southern India 1800–80', D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford University, 2002.

[25] Julia Charlotte Maitland, *Letters from Madras during the Years 1836–39* (London, 1843), pp. 40, 157, 241: cited in Pillai, 'Greeks'.

culture where European and Indian elites met regularly and publicly together.[26]

This last point reflected the fact that many of the wealthiest men in Madras were Indians who not only continued to be in business relationships with Europeans, but sometimes even employed them. Early colonial artistic and architectural styles favoured the employment of European craftsmen to embellish Indian houses and décor.[27] Sometimes, these relations of 'patronage' also spilled over into the political domain: as when the wealthy city merchant, G. Lakshmanarasu Chetty, hired the teacher and journalist Edward Harley to edit the *Crescent* newspaper—which he founded in 1844 largely to criticize the East India Company's administration.[28] Indeed, where the status of the Company was the burning issue of the day, political cleavages regularly crossed racial boundaries. The principal family of English barristers resident in Madras city—George, John Bruce and Eardley Norton—made a business out of mobilizing grievances against it: in 1852, the petitions which they organized against the renewal of its charter, on behalf of a largely Indian clientele, contributed to the legal suspension of the Company by parliament.[29] Nor did political relations of this kind simply die out with the Company itself. Famously, the Madras journalist William Digby took the cause of the South Indian poor to parliament, following the 1876–78 famine, and raised a *cause célèbre* in London.[30] Eardley Norton was also a founding member of the Indian National Congress.

The binary oppositions and strict racial hierarchies, characteristic of conceptions of late nineteenth-century 'colonialism', were a very long time reaching South India, if they ever did. In the meantime, local relationships were shaped by other and different influences. To understand them, it may be necessary first to examine some of 'the

[26] Viscount George Valentia, *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt in 1802–07* (London, 1809); James Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage in 1811 and 1812 to Madras and China* (London, 1814). See also Holden Furber, 'Madras in 1787' in Holden Furber, *Private Fortunes and Company Profits in the India Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Aldershot, 1997); also Susan Neild, 'Colonial Urbanism', *Modern Asian Studies*, XIII:2 (1979), pp. 217–46.

[27] For the Nawabs of Arcot, see Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings* (Cambridge), p. 169

[28] R. Sunthralingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India 1852–91* (Arizona, 1974), ch. 2.

[29] Sunthralingam, *Awakening*, ch. 2.

[30] William Digby, *The Famine Campaign in Southern India* (London, 1878).

peculiarities of the South'. But, also, it may be necessary to focus more on the history of the 'early modern' imperialism, out of which the period 1770–1840 came, rather than the 'modern' colonialism which ultimately it turned into—although, here, perhaps never entirely.

The Peculiarities of the South

One feature of the South, which certainly was not peculiar, was that the political discourse through which its 'conquerors' sought to comprehend it should have been historicist in nature: seeking to found the 'new' imperialism on the basis of the 'old' precedents of Indian history. As Robert Travers and Jon Wilson have shown in the context of Bengal, this represented the dominant discourse of the early Company state[31]—and unsurprisingly so. English political discourse at home was cut from the same cloth: with its concerns for legality, 'ancient' constitutional rights, the ageless custom of the common law and the preponderant weight of precedent. Of course, the transfer to India of the principles of a political discourse wrought out of English experience might be seen as an act of 'epistemic violence'. But it would still need to be explained why so many English- (and Scots-) men were convinced that India's history was convergent with that of Britain and 'the civilized world'—or even, in the light of latter-day Orientalist constructions, that it had any 'history' at all.

More particularly in Madras, however, the import of historicism was given a sharp edge by the exigencies of local politics. Having developed as the first and an independent centre of English influence in India, 'Fort St George' (Madras) never reconciled itself to the pretensions of 'Fort William' (Calcutta) to sub-continental hegemony—and still less to the increasing 'interference' that came from London. From the later eighteenth century, it set up a fierce resistance to both: marked, at first, by simple tactics of sabotage—as with the imprisonment of the London-appointed Governor, Lord Pigot, by his own Council in 1776 and the virtual 'selling off' of government offices under Sir Thomas Rumbold.[32] Later, as metropolitan influence strengthened, it took

[31] Wilson, 'Governing Property'; Robert Travers, 'Contested Notions of Sovereignty in Bengal under British Rule 1765–85', Ph.d. dissertation, Cambridge University, 2001.

[32] H. H. Dodwell, *et al.*, *The Cambridge Shorter History of India* (Cambridge, 1934), p. 585.

the form of destabilizing metropolitan relations themselves: as over the long-running scandal of the Nawab of Arcot's debts;[33] over the extension of the Permanent Settlement (which Munro could claim to have overthrown);[34] over the universalisation of the Hindu law;[35] over Charles Trevelyan's 'scandalous' critique of the principles of Indian budgeting in 1859 (which led to his re-call);[36] and even, in its way, to William Digby's denunciation of the *Government of India's* famine policy in the 1870s, which served to promote the different approach to famine favoured by the *Government of Madras*.

Consistently, the tenor of these disputes was that the South was 'different' and that Fort St George understood its society and interests far better than could any 'outsider'; and saw itself charged with defending them against the ignorance and exploitation of the metropolis. In terms of political discourse, of course, this gave an added weight to the significance of historicism: since, if right proceeded on the basis of custom and tradition, it could not be altered from 'outside'. And, relatedly, it gave rise to an industry to discover what this right was in order to prove that it was, indeed, 'different'. The political discourse of Fort St George was largely circumscribed by this historicism, which even informed key issues of internal policy capable of being construed in other terms. The most central of these was whether, as Munro advocated, the state should claim 'ownership' of the soil and cut through much of the social privilege protecting personal forms of right (the *ryotwari* settlement); or whether, as F. W. Ellis and his school advocated, those forms represented inalienable rights to private property and essential frameworks of social hierarchy, which any 'constitutional' state must recognize (the *mirasidari* settlement).[37] But both parties argued, exclusively, from the precedents of Southern history.

[33] At the time of their settlement in 1805, these claims reached £30 million pounds although the British government only agreed to support payment of £2.5 million. See J. D. Gurney, 'The Debts of the Nawab of Arcot', D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford University, 1968.

[34] Stein, *Munro*.

[35] J. H. Nelson, *A Prospectus for the Scientific Study of the Hindu Law* (London, 1881). Nelson was a Madras civilian and sometime judge who, throughout his long career, led a campaign on behalf of Southern exceptionalism in the interpretation of Hindu law.

[36] S. Baliga, 'Sir Charles Trevelyan: Governor of Madras 1859–60' in S. Baliga (ed.), *Studies in Madras Administration* (Madras, 1960).

[37] Government of Madras, *Papers on Mirasi Right Selected from the Records of Government* (Madras, 1862); also, F. W. Ellis, *Three Treatises on Mirasi Right* (Madras, 1852).

Behind this resolute 'localism' can be seen a number of particular interests and social facts. As the Company's centre of power in India drifted away from Madras over the course of the eighteenth century, its servants left behind tended to become isolated and their career prospects limited. After Robert Clive, progressively fewer of them (not even Munro) found their way to the highest offices of state in Calcutta and London. These tendencies were reinforced over the course of the nineteenth century, as recruitment remained patronage-based into the 1860s and the peculiarities of the Southern languages deterred ambitious newcomers. It led to a situation in which the Madras service attracted dynasties of recruits from the same small group of British families—the Sullevans, Stokes, Arbuthnots, Thomases—who served it generation after generation and developed strong local identities.

They also may have developed considerably more. Even into the early nineteenth century, prevailing European mores did not disfavour sexual liaisons with Indians, producing a significant strand of Eurasian blood. While most of the products of these liaisons may have been discarded to orphanages and the social penalties of 'mixed race', some at least were accorded various forms of legitimation—becoming part of what could see itself into mid-century and beyond as a partly 'Anglo-Indian Raj'.[38] Moreover, the economic relations of the eighteenth century—under the Company's 'Old Corruption'—had favoured close business relationships between Company servants and Indian merchants and bankers (linked via the celebrated institution of the *dubash*).[39] While, at least from the 1820s, changes in both the South Indian and 'global' economies tended to make Europeans more dominant in these relationships, they nonetheless carried on in many forms. It was resistance to the imposition of new metropolitan service rules—separating the functions of trade from governance and the spheres of private from public right—which most animated Madras politics, at least until the final resolution of the Nawab of Arcot's debts in 1805. And thereafter, although the new rules were formally imposed, various local conventions weakened their practical effect.

For example, the dynastic character of Madras service left much scope for members of the same families to be involved, promiscuously,

[38] For example, Munro sent one of his 'Indian' daughters back to Edinburgh to be educated by his sister. Stein, *Munro*, p. 247.

[39] Susan Neild Basu, 'The Dubashes of Madras', *Modern Asian Studies*, XVIII:1 (1984), pp. 1–36.

in both business and government—with the Arbuthnots providing not only five generations of 'civilians' but also running the leading presidency bank. These connections could also lead to the distancing of Company 'civilians' from the practices of the state which they served, especially when it came to extending the Company's revenue demands and monopoly rights into areas where they held interests. And it could also affect the character of political discourse: as when John Sullevan, Collector of Coimbatore through most of the 1820s and 1830s, battled against the Board of Revenue to establish the property rights of the Toda tribes in the Nilgiri hills—albeit so that he could then buy them and set up his own plantation industry.[40] Skeins of sympathy, interest and (sometimes) blood linked many of those 'ruling' colonial South India to its local society at least as much as to the metropolis—against which they often made common cause with the 'colonized'.

Needless to say, this complex 'imperial' structure may suggest the need for some qualification to the perception of Eugene Irschick and Thomas Trautmann that the exchanges taking place between British and Indian intellectuals represented open-ended 'dialogues'. The terms of the discourse were firmly set by the character of the Company state and the input of Indian intellectuals was sought and evaluated principally as it related to issues pre-determined by the logic of that discourse. Had an historicism elucidating the peculiarities of the South not been vital to the positions of the Company's leading statesmen, it is hard to think that Indian 'knowledge' would have been accorded so much respect.

Nonetheless, this qualification does not mean that this 'knowledge' was entirely powerless nor that it was provided in an epistemic context with which its providers were necessarily unfamiliar. Given the scarcity of knowledge of India among the British, those Indians who could provide it could inflect imperial perceptions and policies in important ways: as Nicholas Dirks once argued with regard to the Brahmin informants working behind Colonel Mackenzie's famous 'Collection' of lore and custom.[41] Especially because there was a bitter division within the Company state over the nature of prevailing 'tradition', those credited with the ability to elucidate it affected

[40] Gunnel Cederlof, 'The Agency of the Colonial Subject: Claims and Rights in Forestlands in Early Nineteenth-Century Nilgiris', unpublished paper, University of Uppsala, 2002.

[41] Nicholas B. Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', *Representations*, 37 (1992), pp. 56–78.

vital decisions concerning the distribution of wealth, property and status.[42] Also (as we shall see presently), certain features of the pre-colonial state system on the eve of the colonial conquest suggest that Indian informants/intellectuals may already have begun to formulate a political discourse resonant with that of the Company state even before it actually 'arrived'.

The broader texture of social relations in the South also reflected the fact all 'Indians' were by no means powerless in relation to all 'Europeans' or even Britons. It was, for example, as late 1782 that the Mysore armies of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan had stood outside the gates of Fort St George, threatening to throw the English—lock, stock and barrel—into the sea. It was not until 1799 that 'the menace' of Tipu was finally extirpated; nor until 1804 that the Maratha threat to overrun the South was curtailed. And, even afterwards, British military power long lived in fear of challenge by 'contumacious' rajas, 'rapacious' Pindaris, 'fanatical' Mapillas, 'barbarous' tribesmen, the extensive kin-group of Tipu and even its own soldiers—as manifested in the Vellore mutiny of 1806. Until the communications and technological revolutions later in the nineteenth century, British power in the region was never felt to be absolute and the Company conceived itself to be running a military frontier inside South India as much as outside. Fear of revolt commanded a measure of respect for 'native' tradition.

Equally, the independent political/diplomatic initiatives of Indians at the metropolis could question Company authority in the locality. For many years, the Rajas of Thanjavur employed the redoubtable Edmund Burke as their lawyer in London—mobilizing British political opinion in their cause.[43] Equally, the Nawab of Arcot (and his creditors) developed a considerable 'interest' among members of parliament in Westminster.[44] Once more, the consolidation of the imperial state from the early nineteenth century reduced such possibilities—but it did not end them: as witness the Norton-led attack on the Company charter in 1853 and William Digby's intervention on behalf of famine victims in 1878. Indian interests and opinion never entirely lost the ability to bring the metropolis back to 'discipline'

[42] Irschick, *Dialogue*.

[43] P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Vol. 5 (Oxford, 1981).

[44] Lucy Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics* (Oxford, 1962).

errant British behaviour in the locality—and thus could never entirely be dismissed or disregarded.

A major problem for the British locally, of course, was that there were hardly any of them. As late as 1871, the European population of Madras city—which then totalled 400,000—was just 3600; and, in the presidency as a whole including members of the army, it numbered just 14,000 or 0.04% of a total population of 32 millions.[45] Further, Europeans owned very few of 'the means of production'. Madras never developed a large, expatriate-based commercial and industrial system, as did Calcutta.

Two other factors also buttressed the importance of 'natives' in colonial Madras. A first was the presence of some of the largest Princely states in India—Mysore, Hyderabad, Baroda and Travancore. If Nicholas Dirks' view of the 'hollowing' of Indian crowns after the coming of British rule were meant to be extrapolated beyond the remote backwater of Pudukkottai, it would miss much of the South Indian colonial context. Indian kings may have lost their ability to make war on the British (and on each other) and have had their former re-distributive political systems attenuated by the imposition of colonial modes of surplus extraction. But they hardly disappeared into insignificance. Indeed, protected by the colonial settlement, their effective powers over their own subjects often increased, as did their possibilities of accumulating wealth. The Nizam of Hyderabad was widely regarded during the nineteenth century as the richest man in the world. Also, being stripped of the power to make war by no means stripped them of all political influence or the desire (and ability) to contest colonial authority. From mid-century, Baroda, Travancore and Mysore were to set themselves up as centres of competitive 'social modernization' against British India—attempting to prove in western circles that modern Indians could be more 'civilized' and could rule themselves better than any colonial state.[46] The influences spread from these quasi-autonomous centres did much to give Indians in the South access to bases of wealth and status outside immediate colonial 'subject-hood'—as well as to inspire them with possibilities of the future.

A second highly significant factor in the South was that not all 'Europeans' were 'British'. From the sixteenth century, the region's

[45] *Madras Census. 1871. Vol. II* (Madras, 1874), pp. 10–11.

[46] See, for example, James Manor, *Political Change in an Indian State — Mysore 1917–55* (Delhi, 1977).

rich commerce had attracted Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French and 'German' missions of 'trade and civilization', as well as those of the English. To the turn of the nineteenth century, political rivalries—especially between the English, the French and the Dutch—had been intense and, although their edge was subsequently blunted, they remained significant in various areas of culture and diplomacy even into the twentieth century: as when the Bengali 'terrorist', Aurobindo Ghosh, escaped the English hangman to the sanctuary of French Pondichery. English Evangelical Christianity also faced severe competition in the South from Mediterranean Catholicism, established much earlier, as well as from the different Protestant temper of Dutch Calvinism and Danish, 'German' and, later, American Lutheranism.[47] Crucially, this meant that European culture never became entirely synonymous with British colonial rule; nor that the British were able to monopolize the dissemination of European knowledge and the possibility of contacts with Europe. Engaging with European knowledge, therefore, did not have the immediate effect of implying subordination to colonial authority.

It may have been this more open and plural context which, perhaps, accounts for the degree of eclectic cultural borrowing and exchange with Europe, which was a marked feature of the South over a long period. The rajas of Thanjavur were not alone in experimenting with western ideas: Christianity had its greatest 'successes' in South India, not merely during the English nineteenth but from the Portuguese sixteenth century. European ideas on (and forms of) statecraft, weaponry and governance also percolated into the Southern 'mix'. Marthanda Varma's state revolution in Travancore in the 1740s, for example, is inconceivable without his long exposure to the principles of Portuguese and Dutch mercantilism along the west coast.[48]

Importantly, however, eclectic borrowings at this time remained informed by an Indian logic, which bent them to serve its own rather than a European purpose. As Susan Bayly has seen with regard to Christian (and Islamic) 'conversion', there was extensive adaptation to local cultural institutions and needs.[49] Equally, if in another dimension, Tipu Sultan's interest in European weaponry was utilized in Mysore to develop distinctively 'local' forms of rocketry and

[47] Frykenberg,. 'Conversion Movements'.
[48] Ashin Das Gupta, *Malabar in Asian Trade 1740–1800* (Cambridge, 1967).
[49] Bayly, *Saints;* Frykenberg, 'Conversion Movements'.

cannon-casting.[50] Doubtless, the supremacy eventually established by English culture, and the growing authority of European over 'Other' knowledges as the nineteenth century wore on, affected Indian eclecticism and reduced it, in many circumstances, to 'slavish' imitation of the colonizers. But much of the old spirit continued to live on in the South: where Evangelical missionaries found themselves drawn into caste conflicts over honour and status, which had a much older history;[51] and where European ideas of modern statehood came eventually to be turned against the colonizers themselves.

Nor, in its own context, should the South's patterns of cultural pluralism and eclecticism be regarded as surprising. They were established long before western Europeans arrived. Trade, migration, and warfare had thrown peoples and cultures from across India and the surrounding Indian Ocean together within its lands. K. N. Chaudhuri has surmised three 'networks of trade and civilization' embracing parts of India and linking it, variously, with Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and Levant and south-east Asia.[52] All three intersected in South India. In Madras even in the late seventeenth century, Tamils and Telugus, Marathas, Gujaratis, Armenians, Tamil-Arabian Marakkayyas, Deccani Shi'as and 'Northern' Sunni Muslims, Hindus of every sectarian tradition, French and Portuguese Catholics, English and Dutch Protestants and Syrian Christians lived and worked cheek by jowl. Robert Frykenberg has been inclined to conceive their relationship as marked by distance and separation: likening the situation to a mosaic composed of hard, but very distinct, cultural 'pebbles'.[53] And, certainly, it would be a mistake to underestimate the extent to which, in a society where power was widely associated with exclusivity and relationships were articulated through (various forms of) caste, the preservation of 'difference' was important.

Nonetheless, there were also and obvious cross-cultural borrowings—indicative of a willingness to absorb, blend and experiment. These might be found in everything from the spread of 'Telugu' ideas of kingship and agriculture into the Tamil country to the use of Arabic letters to write Tamil texts to the absorption of Sanskrit into elite Tamil to the diffusion of common myths and legends across

[50] Nikhiles Guha, *Pre-British State System in South India, Mysore 1761–99* (Calcutta, 1985).
[51] Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India* (Cambridge, 1999).
[52] K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge, 1985).
[53] R. E. Frykenberg, 'The Social Morphology of Madras' in K. Ballhatchet (ed.), *Changing South Asia* (London, 1984).

regional and linguistic boundaries to experiments in the plastic arts—which threw up syncretic traditions later to defy colonial conventions classifying all art and architecture as either Hindu or Muslim.[54] They might also be found in the tendency for certain languages to become associated with certain specialist functions—and to be used by everybody for those functions regardless of their particular 'ethnic' backgrounds. Persian, Marathi and Telugu were ubiquitous languages of state; 'Hindustani' the *lingua franca* of war; Gujarati, Armenian and Telugu were languages of commerce.

While no simple 'melting pot', South Indian society was also not marked either by the maintenance of impermeable cultural boundaries. It was a society used to various forms of 'Otherness', which it accommodated with varying degrees of syncretism and separation. When western Europeans first started joining it from the sixteenth century, they were drawn into its matrix as one (or, in fact, several) group(s) among many and, for a very long time, were similarly accommodated: part-distanced, part-imitated, part-absorbed. Although, undoubtedly, from the late eighteenth century some of the English may have raised claims to a different kind of treatment—in which their singularity and authority would be recognized and a binary, 'colonial' society formed under them—it remains unclear how far their pretensions were realized, certainly before the mid-nineteenth century and possibly not even then.

An 'Early Modern' Imperialism: Transitions and Transpositions

In effect, South Indian society in the early 'colonial' period was the product of a long history of relationships with other parts of India and of the world, which dated back far beyond the sudden rise of the English Company and continued to inform the peoples over whom it attempted to 'rule'. Particularly relevant to that history would seem the period from the sixteenth century when not only did western Europe first make its presence felt, but—and perhaps more importantly—changes within Indian society appear to have taken some novel and significant directions.

[54] On architecture, Richard M. Eaton, 'The Articulation of Islamic Space in the Medieval Deccan' in Richard M. Eaton (ed.), *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (Delhi, 2000); on wider issues of cultural overlap, Bayly, *Saints*; Ludden, *Peasant History*; Cynthia Talbot, *Pre-colonial India in Practice* (Oxford, 2001).

Of course, to talk of 'change'—and 'history'—*within* India, and still more of the possibility of meaningful communication *between* cultures and societies (including European ones), will doubtless raise methodological hackles among certain anthropologists and ethno-historians: for whom India's uniqueness and incommensurability, 'ruptured' only by the latter-day intrusions of western modernity, remain articles of faith. Most recently, Bernard Cohn has told us of early contacts between Europe and India that: 'Europeans of the seventeenth century lived in a world of signs and correspondences... Hindus and Muslims operated with an unbounded substantive theory of objects and persons'.[55] Perceptions of so absolute a 'difference' between cultures, obviously, draw heavily on the structuralist methodological assumptions, which have been deeply etched into the study of India by the powerful visions of Louis Dumont and the ethno-sociology of McKim Marriott and Ron Inden.[56] In South India, Nicholas Dirks has contested the significance of caste (and purity and pollution) as the basic principles informing structure, pointing instead to the vital role of divine kingship. But he has cast his own general theory in no less structuralist terms and continued to emphasize the uniqueness of India in relation to Europe.[57]

Yet it may be that, in these post-structuralist times, the status of Indian studies as, perhaps, the last repository of structuralism in the western academy needs further examination. The notion that India is unique and incommensurable, of course, was basic to later nineteenth century colonial thought and to conservative/Romantic Orientalism. An obsessive concern with 'difference', as Kenan Malik and Robert Young have argued, was an underlying feature of the 'race sciences' out of which anthropology developed.[58] Further problems concern the inevitable elitism of 'holistic' approaches to culture:[59] where, in Indian

[55] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 18–19. For critical responses, see William R. Pinch, 'Same Difference in India and Europe', *History and Theory*, 38:3 (1999), pp. 389–407; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Frank Submissions' in H. V. Bowen, *et al.* (eds), *The Worlds of the East India Company* (Greenwich and Leicester, 2002).

[56] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (London, 1970); M. Marriott and R. Inden, 'Caste Systems' in *Encylcopaedia Britannica*, 15th Edition (Chicago, 1974).

[57] Dirks, *Hollow*.

[58] Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race* (Basingstoke, 1996); Robert Young, *Colonial Desire* (London, 1995).

[59] Where 'a culture' is defined exclusively in terms of what its elites and non-elites share in common. For a defence of this perspective and a critique of 'history-from-below', see Bernard S. Cohn, 'History and Anthropology: The State of Play', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22: 2 (1980), pp. 198–219.

studies, the vast possibilities of social theory appear reduced to a simple juxtaposition between the provenance of royal as opposed to Brahmanic (caste) ideology. And, no less, there is the problem of historical change: where the manifold differences of Indian society between the Vedic Age and the eighteenth century risk reduction to epiphenomena.

Nor are the many familiar objections to these procedures overcome—post-colonially—by adopting the language of post-structuralism and the moral high ground of Subalternity. Whatever the concept of 'episteme' informing Dirks' notion of the epistemic rupture caused by colonialism, for example, it cannot be Foucault's: Foucault insisted that his concept had no boundaries but represented 'an open-field of relationships no doubt indefinitely specifiable'.[60] Equally, appeals to the subaltern status of an holistically-conceived Indian culture—crushed under the jackboot of Western Modernity—has the peculiar effect of turning kings and Brahmins (taken to supply its principles of structure) into the principal victims of colonialism. While, no doubt, a nice conceit from the perspective of the upper-caste progeny of those kings and Brahmins, currently slipping 'subaltern' towards 'bhadralok' studies[61] and gaining accreditation in parts of the western academy as self-representatives of 'India',[62] it is possible to conceive the very real victimage of colonialism in somewhat broader terms.

Fortunately, however, there are other perspectives on 'late medieval India' and on the wider 'early modern' world, which would view issues of culture in more variegated and multi-layered terms and offer a more nuanced approach to the problem of 'difference'. Some of the most striking recent research on 'medieval' history has been concerned to reveal parallels between developments in 'Hindu' India and in other

[60] Michel Foucault, 'Politics and the Study of Discourse', *Ideology and Consciousness*, III (1978), p. 10. On the curious translation of post-structuralism into post-colonial theory, see Robert Young. *White Mythologies* (London, 1990).

[61] The bhadralok represent the 'respectable people' of Bengal. For their takeover of both subject-hood and authorship in the once-radical Subaltern Studies project, see Ramachandra Guha, 'Subaltern Studies and Bhadralok Studies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30:33 (1995), pp. 2056–9; also Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, 1998).

[62] For example on Subaltern Studies, 'Indians are, for perhaps the first time since colonization, showing sustained signs of re-appropriating the capacity to represent themselves'. Ronald Inden, 'Orientalist Constructions of India', *Modern Asian Studies*, XX: (1986). It is not clear what status Inden would give to the writings of those members of the original Subaltern Studies collective who were not 'Indians'.

parts of 'Eurasia',[63] both Islamic and Christian. Important among these parallels would be the emergence of vernacular literatures out of 'high', classical traditions;[64] the formation of ethnic kinds of loyalty and identity around symbols of language and religion;[65] the development of new forms of numeracy and accountancy skills;[66] the formulation of definitively 'historical' types of consciousness and writing.[67] These developments were never precisely the same as in western Europe nor, very clearly, did they produce the same immediate outcomes. Nonetheless, only a desire to pre-empt the issue *a priori* in order to defend a post-colonial theory[68] could deny the possibility that, as they engaged with Europe's expansion, they inflected its meanings to contribute to a global modernity, which has steadfastly refused to produce simple patterns of uniformity. And they may also help to explain why some Enlightenment intellectuals, struggling to locate the sources of a universal history, should have been so convinced that India (or the segment/layer/level of it which they encountered) was already part of their own 'civilization' and not of a completely different world.

Two particular developments from the sixteenth century also involved direct contacts between East and West and provided the means by which Europe was to become an intimate part of India's history. The first was the growth of trade and manufacture, which, from South India, embraced many economies around the Indian Ocean littoral long before the Europeans ever reached it. The progressive commercialization of the economy represents a very strong theme in South Indian history and, even by the fifteenth century, was starting to

[63] The idea of Eurasia posits common cultural strands embracing early modern Europe, India and China. For, no doubt, an overstatement of the case, see Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge, 1996). For a more complex perspective, Frank Perlin, *The Invisible City* (Aldershot, 1993) and *Unbroken Landscape* (Aldershot, 1994).

[64] Sheldon Pollock, 'India and the Vernacular Millennium 1000–1500' in S. Eisenstadt and W. Schlichter (eds), *Collective Identities and Political Order*. Special Issue: *Daedalus*, 127:3 (1998); Veena Naregal, 'Language and Power in Pre-colonial Western India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*. XXXVII:3 (2000), pp. 259–94.

[65] Cynthia Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37:4 (1995), pp. 692–722.

[66] Frank Perlin, 'State Formation Reconsidered, Part Two'. *Modern Asian Studies*, XIX:3 (1985), pp. 415–80.

[67] Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time* (Delhi, 2002).

[68] As would seem the case in Naregal, 'Language', pp. 290–3. For an alternative view, C. A. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (Delhi, 1998).

have wide effects on society, institutions and culture(s).[69] Economic specialization became advanced with bulk commodities (grain, salt, cotton, iron) circulating around the long coastline or through the interior by bullock pack. Money (or rather specie) penetrated social relations even down to the level of the rural household. Specie was largely drawn into South India in payment for trade goods (especially cotton textiles), which set up exchange relations through which ideas and 'knowledges' also passed. Latter day fixations on what 'the West' taught 'India' have rather obscured the significance of the reverse flows in this era—where 'knowledges' of botany, medicine, textile manufacture and much else were transmitted the other way.[70] Indeed, shades of this reverse flow continued in the South well into the colonial era. As late as the 1840s, a variety of Company officials and scientists sought to sustain a local iron and steel industry on the grounds that its technologies and products were superior to anything to be found in Britain.[71]

Expanding commercialization also began to affect, and to re-constitute, the relations of 'right'. The post-Vijayanagar Nayak polity appears to have been largely articulated through relations of trade and money—a form of 'tributary commercialism' as David Ludden has called it[72]—since land taxes were either very light or else re-distributed (via *inam* immunities) as 'gifts' to bind together kingdoms.[73] These relations, in turn, began to promote forms of 'portfolio capitalism' whereby men of money moved between different trades and transacted on behalf of the state (via tax farming).[74] Commercial forces also could penetrate more deeply still: local lordship and *inam* rights, notionally tied to memberships of kin-bodies, royal gifts and endowments to/by the gods, began to become fungible and to circulate almost independently of the ties of social ascription.

[69] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990).

[70] For example, Richard Grove, 'Indigenous Knowledge and the Significance of South-West India for Portuguese and Dutch Constructions of Tropical Nature', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXX:1 (1996), pp. 121–44.

[71] Edward Balfour, *Report on the Iron Ores and Iron and Steel of Southern India* (London, 1855).

[72] David Ludden, 'Ecological Zones and the Cultural Economy of Irrigation in Southern Tamilnadu', *South Asia*, I:1 (1978), pp. 1–14.

[73] Dirks, *Hollow*.

[74] Sanjay Subrahmanyam and C. A. Bayly, 'Portfolio Capitalists and the Economy of Early Modern India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XXIV:4 (1988), pp. 401–24.

Indeed, in what admittedly must be taken to represent an extreme case, Tsukasa Mizushima has claimed that, by the mid-eighteenth century, the possession of land and local lordship in the districts surrounding Madras was largely determined by the forces of the market.[75] Recently, his perspective has been partially re-inforced by Ravi Ahuja who has found high levels of mobility in the labour markets of the same area at the same time.[76]

The extremity of the cases made by Mizushima and Ahuja, however, may relate not only to their physical location near Madras, but also to their mid-eighteenth century time period following some dramatic convolutions in the relations of the state. South Indian historiography has been inclined to pose a long period of state evolution, from the Cholas to the Nayakas, but then to stop dead in its tracks awaiting the 'external' intervention of the East India Company at the end of the eighteenth century: Nicholas Dirks, for example and as Cynthia Talbot argues, captures Pudukkottai at a specific moment of the seventeenth century to represent South Indian 'little kingship' at the fullness of its powers.[77] But this neatly elides developments across the century in between where much suggests that major forces of change were already at work.

Given broad acceptance of the view that the Vijayanagar Empire possessed forms of authority more ritual and symbolic than administrative, the focus of interest in the Southern state has tended to fall on the relations of Nayak princedoms and, beneath them, on *palaiyakkarrar* 'little kingdoms'. But, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has argued, this can exclude sight of larger-scale regional configurations of authority and, especially from the late seventeenth century, it may have been at this level that very significant developments were starting to take place. Subrahmanyam has noted in Wodeyar Mysore shifts towards more centralized forms of rule reflective of the availability of greater commercial resources.[78] Be that as it may, the inruption into the South from the 1680s of Aurangzeb's conquering armies—and Mughal approaches to government—would seem to have greatly speeded up this process. The fall-out of the Mughal conquest across the first half of the eighteenth century was a series of regional states,

[75] T.Mizushima, *Nattar and Socio-Economic Change in South India in 18th and 19th Centuries* (Tokyo, 1986).
[76] Ravi Ahuja, 'Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context: Madras, c.1750–1800', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXXVI:4 (2002), pp. 793–826.
[77] Talbot, *Pre-colonial*, p. 86.
[78] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Penumbral Visions* (Ann Arbor, 2001).

in Arcot, Mysore, Hyderabad, Thanjavur and the southern Maratha country (as well as, if for different reasons, in Travancore) battling against each other for supremacy and generating forces re-shaping the relations of the state.

South Indian historiography, where it has given attention to these state new formations, has been inclined to do so in relation to an agenda set by the later colonial British. On the one hand, in response to British charges that they merely spread chaos, Irfan Habib has attempted to see them (and especially Mysore) as representing indigenous forms of modernization, which might have led to an alternative history to colonialism.[79] On the other hand, in response to charges that they sought to impose 'Islamic tyranny', Susan Bayly and Kate Brittlebank have emphasized their continued patronage of Hindu and local institutions.[80] Much, no doubt, might be said on several sides in these debates. But the tendency in both to search for intention and coherence in policy and may have obscured the wider consequences of often very pragmatic decision-making.

What Aurangzeb's conquest released in the South was an exponential increase in the scale and costs of warfare and a progressive technological transformation in its nature, which carried profound economic and sociological implications. First, as new cavalry forms of warfare established their dominance, large numbers of North Indian horsemen came South to join the armies of the contending regional powers.[81] Then, from mid-century, the emphasis began to switch towards the disciplined infantry warfare pioneered by Robert Clive. But both of these changes had one thing in common: the 'new' soldiers were expensive and not easily accommodated by the 'old' fiscal methods of assigning *inam* 'gifts'.[82] Most of them demanded cash payments and hence put an enormous strain on central treasuries—pressing them to extend their search for revenues, frequently onto the land, to become more directly involved in commerce and to experiment with their own forms of 'Asian mercantilism'.[83]

[79] Irfan Habib (ed.), *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernization under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan* (Delhi, 1999).

[80] Bayly, *Saints*; Kate Brittlebank, *Tipu Sultan's Search for Legitimacy* (Delhi, 1997).

[81] Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy* (Cambridge, 1990).

[82] Stewart Gordon, 'The Limited Adoption of European-style Military Forces by Eighteenth-Century Rulers in India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XXXV:3 (1998), pp. 229–46.

[83] C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* (Cambridge, 1983).

Such pressures directly impacted on the structure of the Nayak state, creating a series of legacies which the Company itself was to inherit. One, very significantly, was the rising political influence of Hindu upper caste, especially Brahmin, groups. Expanding fiscal demands on the regional state began to place a premium on fiscal—specifically accountancy and scribal—skills, which very much favoured those social groups hereditarily trained to provide them.[84] In much of the South, this was particularly noticeable because those most possessing these skills tended to be Maratha Brahmins, who spread widely.[85] Brahmanic influence on political power and cultural authority was increasingly marked in the eighteenth-century South—most obviously at the court of Thanjavur but also in many other places.[86]

Second, higher demands for revenue from the new regional states began to put pressure on the 'little kingdoms' of the *palaiyakkarrar*. This was clearest in Travancore where Marthanda Varma slaughtered his intermediary Nayar aristocracy to establish a highly centralized form of military fiscal state.[87] But it was manifested almost everywhere in the way that the armies of Mysore, Hyderabad and Arcot utilized practically every gap in the warfare between themselves to turn inwards and 'pacify' their own *palaiyakkarrar*—increasing revenue demands and displacing them, where possible, with *amildari* systems of direct revenue administration. Admittedly, the gaps between bouts of regional warfare were seldom very long and, in the context of campaigns, regional states might yet appeal to their residual *palaiyakkarrar* for support.[88] This provided scope for some, at least, to postpone their own demise and survive into the Company era. But their function (and thus the nature of their authority) was changing: as Nicholas Dirks' own evidence from Pudukkottai in the late eighteenth century shows, they were obliged to meet ever increasing demands from their 'overlords', which squeezed their fiscal bases.[89] In many ways, the day of the South Indian 'little king' was already turning.

[84] Bayly, *Caste*.

[85] Gus Kruijtzer, 'Madanna, Akkana and the Brahmin Revolution', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 45:2 (2002), pp. 231–66.

[86] For a classic illustration of the increasing influence of Brahmanic discourse in Thanjavur, see Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife* (Delhi, 1989).

[87] Das Gupta, *Malabar*.

[88] Also, some of their own generals might revolt and seek alliances with *palaiyakarrar* to consolidate their rebellion, as in the famous case of Yusuf Khan. See Bayly, *Saints*, pp. 193–221.

[89] Dirks, *Hollow*, pp. 193–9. On the squeezing of the Thanjavur Raj to the point of bankruptcy, Subrahmanyam, *Penumbral*.

And third, this vastly increased central pressure for revenues began to question the existing structure of 'right' and to tear it apart. Over-concentration on royal sources of political authority has, perhaps, obscured sight of the several other sources of right appealed to in Southern society. But, as Frank Perlin has shown, the pre-colonial state was (at least) dualistic in its bases of authority. Counterpoised to claims to right made in the name of kings (as gifts) were also claims made in the name of 'community'—inalienable rights to possession of the lands cleared by ancestors and dedicated to the gods.[90] In addition, there were also 'personal' rights claimed on the basis of divine intervention—ie., as the result of direct gift from the gods, which no man could take away. Doubtless, in 'normal' times (if such ever existed), these different sources of right might converge and reinforce one another in securing possession. But the constant warfare of the eighteenth century hardly represented normal times and, in the face of increased royal demands, these different sources of right could come into conflict. Although (for obvious political reasons) there was little consistency to it—and no outright attack on all forms of *inam* property and immunity—there was a strong tendency for regional states to foreclose on many past forms of privilege/right: which, in turn, promoted counter-demands that these privileges/rights be accorded the status of deriving from community or divine—and not royal—authority.[91] To add to the problem, commercialization had frequently removed many privileges/rights from the hands of their original possessors; and, indeed, the impact of war and forced migrations (as in northern Thanjavur and Malabar) had seen whole upper caste/class populations removed from the land and their privileges/rights 'occupied' by others.

The developments of the eighteenth century very much disturbed the lower levels of the state in Southern India and promoted widespread dissension over the nature of the authority governing it. As Jon Wilson and Robert Travers have seen for Bengal, so for South India, incoming Company administrators were inundated with petitions demanding the arbitration of now-uncertain and contentious

[90] Frank Perlin, 'State Formation'; also, Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1980).

[91] On the multiple sources of authority informing *mirasi* right, see 'Papers on Mirasi Right'; also Ellis, 'Three Treatises'; for an illustration of these rights, Dharma Kumar, 'Private Property in Asia? The Case of Medieval South India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXVII:2 (1985), pp. 340–66. For a perspective from medieval studies, N. Karashima, *History and Society in South India* (Delhi, 2001).

rights—which function greatly helped the early Company state to establish its local legitimacy.[92] Where the judgements of Company officials—informed by English principles of common law—coincided with the claims of Indian litigants to have their own versions of 'custom' ratified, a situation was created in which meanings could overlap to the point of close convergence. Few *mirasidars* and *inamdars*, petitioning the Company courts, showed any doubt that their rights/privileges were inalienable and founded since 'time immemorial'—not based in the resumable 'gifts' of kings.[93]

It was also against the highly volatile political background of the eighteenth century that the English Company rose to power and, indeed, such a background was a key condition for its rise at all. Its conquest *on land* was certainly not wrought out of any obvious technological or military superiority—or, at least, of one which it could control for long. Rather, it rose to power by supplying a number of key resources—commercial and military—to the main contending regional states, who thus fell fatally into reliance upon it. And also by pursuing a shrewd policy of alliances which, for example, saw its major opponent, Mysore, defeated in 1792 more by the armies of Travancore, Hyderabad and the Marathas than by its own forces, which were small. But its strategy of conquest—much more from within the local political system than from outside—also left lasting legacies: for example, in the extensive princely states (of its final allies), which always limited the fullness of colonial hegemony in the South.

This strategy also bequeathed it the principal problems of state, which it faced in the early nineteenth century and which it can scarcely be said to have resolved. The most important of these concerned issues of 'right', where the Company state's room for manoeuvre was further constrained by its own institutional history. The position favoured, and most famously enunciated, by F.W. Ellis—which supported the recognition of *inam* immunities and *mirasi* rights as 'private property'—had developed early in Madras circles, particularly in relation to the threat which the 'Islamic despotism' of the rising regional states posed to its own interests. The position was developed as part of a broader political platform seeking alliance with leading Hindu merchants and bankers and promising the restoration of a 'Hindu Golden Age' as the benefit of Company power.[94] Importantly, its main tenets were also

[92] Wilson, 'Governing Property'; Travers, 'Contested'; for south India, see Ludden, *Peasant History*.
[93] See the petitional material assembled in 'Papers on Mirasi Right'.
[94] Frykenberg, 'Company Circari'; Irschick, *Dialogue*.

etched into and preserved by the new legal system developing from the 1770s under Warren Hastings' direction.

By contrast, Thomas Munro's *ryotwari* version of 'history preserved'—which developed as the Company became the dominant power—took off from the 'new' tradition of the regional states and sought to extrapolate their pretensions to despotism. The state now would 'continue' its reduction of local immunities and privileges to create an unmediated relationship between itself and the *ryot* (peasant). While, obviously, self-serving of Company power, Munro's vision also had a radical social edge. Cutting away (caste, religious and hereditary) privileges meant opening access to the land to previously un- or under-privileged groups, whose 'tenure' it offered to secure (in return for revenue payments) against the claims of established elites.[95]

However, as events turned out, neither side could claim to have 'won' the argument and what the colonial state produced, down to mid-century, was more in the nature of confusion further confounded. The law courts, which enshrined the *inam/mirasi* theory of history, and the revenue department, which enshrined the *ryotwari* equivalent, existed at daggers drawn throughout the period and were constantly litigating against each other. The main effect of this, besides increasing the uncertainty surrounding property, was to narrow the definition of 'privileged' rights to ever stricter categories of ascription.[96] Against pressures from the revenue department to confiscate all 'false' privileges and immunities, the courts preserved them only at the cost of tying their legitimacy to their 'true' and 'originary' holders—and thereby threatening to undo much of the effective social mobility, which centuries of commercialization, labour movement and even war had brought.[97]

Early Colonial South India: Continuities and Discontinuities

As the last point should make clear, even arguments based on continuities between the Company state and previous regimes have to

[95] Stein, *Munro*.

[96] D. A. Washbrook, 'Economic Depression and the Making of Traditional Society in Colonial India 1820–55', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, VI:3 (1993), pp. 237–63.

[97] D. A. Washbrook, 'Law, State and Agrarian Society in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, XV:3 (1981), pp. 649–721.

take account of the very real discontinuities, which had been brought to the region by the middle of the nineteenth century. South India in 1850 was becoming a very different place from what it had been in 1750. The commercial vibrancy, cultural pluralism, social mobility and intense military conflict of the earlier period were giving way to a more static, sedentarized, agrarian-based and self-consciously 'Hindu' form of society. However, before assigning 'colonialism' full responsibility for this development, it may be important to consider some of the wider issues affecting the question.

First, much of this result can be seen to have come about—simply—as a consequence of the Company's 'conquest'. By, ultimately, eliminating or seriously weakening all of its rivals—both European and Indian—the English Company reduced the forces of competition, which previously had driven the system. This was the more so because the Company—until the day that it died—was a mercantilist organization aimed at establishing and exploiting monopolies: which it preserved, even after the 1813 Charter Act, through a highly extractive revenue system and 'Crown prerogative' over many of the most valuable trades.[98] Previously, even as the new regional states had pursued their own forms of mercantilism, competition between them—in a context of highly mobile flows of capital and labour—had provided protection and strengthened bargaining positions against the state. Competition now was heavily constrained and the full force of despotic authority could be used against society to extract resources, most notably through a revenue system whose weight became penal. The result was entirely as Adam Smith had predicted it would be: the crushing of economic initiative and the impoverishment of the country.[99] Even by the 1840s, as the Southern economy limped from crisis to crisis, questions were being raised—in Madras as much as London—about the future of the Company and of its smothering *ryotwari* system. It represented an extremely 'archaic'[100] form of capitalism, born of the merging of eighteenth-century European mercantilism and Indian 'tributary commercialism', which

[98] These features greatly reduced the significance of the 'free trade' introduced by the Charter Act; see D. A. Washbrook, 'The Two Faces of Colonialism', *Oxford History of the British Empire. III* (Oxford, 1999).

[99] Smith, *Wealth*, Bk IV, Part 3.

[100] The term is Christopher Bayly's. C. A. Bayly, 'Archaic and Modern Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, c.1750–1850' in A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002).

threatened to block the future 'progress' of the nineteenth-century world.

Equally, many of the features of Southern society becoming prominent at this time reflected the 'fulfilment' of trajectories developing across the eighteenth century and brought to 'triumph' by the elimination of constraints. The Brahminization of Hindu culture was as much ensured by the final *coup de grace*, which the Company delivered to 'little kingship', as it was by its ever greater 'scribal' elaboration of the state. Admittedly, in the eighteenth century itself, there had been countervailing forces derived from commercialization and from war: where competition could raise the price of labour and the contestation of 'rights' could give low-caste groups opportunities to gain land, wealth and dignity.[101] The eighteenth century was pregnant with many more possibilities than those ultimately born in the nineteenth. But, as the Company state established its grip on the economy, many of these possibilities disappeared. The 'liberation' promised by *ryotwari* tenure collapsed beneath an intolerable weight of revenue assessment and the law courts, under pressure, validated 'privilege/right' much more in relation to ascription than achievement. South Indian society was rendered ennervate by the suffocating power of the Company state: but a power reflective more of the eighteenth-century past than the nineteenth-century future.

However, there was one way in which, from the late 1820s, the future did obtrude into the South to compound the problems already inherited. While 'local' resistance may have kept Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism at arm's length, it could not do the same for the impact of Britain's Industrial Revolution. South India's overseas textile markets collapsed, staunching vital inflows of specie and precipitating a general price collapse which was to last for a generation. Whatever difficulties for the economy may have been created, both earlier and later, by the supposed 'drain' of wealth to Britain, the problem here was one of 'vent': markets atrophied and a long depression sapped economic vitality.[102] By the time that the depression lifted, in the

[101] D. A. Washbrook, 'Land and Labour Relations in Late Eighteenth-Century South India: The Golden Age of the Pariah?' in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (Delhi, 1993); also Ravi Ahuja, 'Labour Unsettled: Mobility and Protest in the Madras Region 1750–1800'. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 35:4 (1998), pp. 381–404.

[102] K. N. Chaudhuri (ed.), *The Economic Development of India under the East India Company* (Cambridge, 1971). A. Sarada Raju, *Economic Conditions in Madras Presidency 1800–1850* (Madras, 1941).

1850s, what once had been one of the early modern world's great commercial economies had been turned into a 'backward' agricultural dependency.

How far the fact that South India was under colonial/Company rule directly contributed to this outcome remains a debatable question. The global impact of the British Industrial Revolution—which drastically reduced commodity prices—affected most of the rest of the world similarly, whether it was 'colonized' or not. While what might have happened had the supposedly 'modernizing' Mysore state of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan defeated the English in 1782 remains one of the teasing counterfactuals of Southern history, it is difficult to think that it could have made much difference by the later nineteenth century. A 'reactively-modernizing' Mysore must surely have gone the same way as Mohammed Ali's Egypt and the China of the Tung-Ch'i Restoration before the West's industrial power.

But in two ways, perhaps, it was important for South India and for the wider world that an archaic form of colonial/Company rule was already established *before* British industrial supremacy became manifest—and ways which re-open questions on the transition(s) of the eighteenth century. In the first place, it guaranteed that the depression would be deep and prolonged and that many of its possible outcomes would be foreclosed. The Company's 'victory' did not only eliminate forces of competition in the market but, as Christopher Bayly has argued, also forces of internal consumption and demand. As princely armies were cut back and elite display trimmed, domestic markets tended to contract—promoting de-urbanization and de-industrialization. Further problems were created by the tendency of the Company to export specie to China and deplete an already constricted money supply.[103]

Added to this, both the mercantilist and the historicist biases of the Company state combined to create a situation in which 'profit' would be sought much more readily through the pursuit of 'rent' than through the expansion of production. With the revenue system dominating the economy, energies were turned away from productive investment (which might attract penal taxation) and towards either diverting revenue surpluses into private hands or else

[103] Bayly, *Rulers*; also, C. A. Bayly, *India and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988).

protecting resources from the revenue's grasp in the first place.[104] Moreover, given the Company's settlement of rights, both diversion and protection were best pursued by emphasising the ancient and/or hereditary character of privilege—since any signs of 'achievement' risked de-legitimation by the courts and/or confiscation by the revenue department. In the Madras Ceded Districts between 1800 and the 1850s, for example, a veritable 'revolution' took place in property rights, concentrating landed wealth as never before. Whereas, at the former date, local village officers (who controlled the records) had held only 22% of richer *inam* land, outside *ryotwari* assessment, by the latter date they 'owned' 69% of it.[105] But this vast transfer of assets had no implications whatever for increased production: it merely buttressed the privileges of hereditary (and upper caste) village officer families. The very 'non-modern' forms of the Company state directed South Indian society to meet the challenges of the new 'global' economy on the bases of a bastardized traditionalism, which precluded many possibilities of change.

Moreover, and second, that the Company could afford to do this—and ultimately bequeath the British Crown a much impoverished fragment of Empire—had much to do with the wider role which India now started to play in Britain's imperial strategy. Earlier, comparison was made with Khedivate Egypt and Ch'ing China and their fates in the later nineteenth century. But it was, of course, Indian-based and -financed armies, which did the military job of subordinating them to the forces of Western industrialism. The wider significance of the Company state in India was that it provided a base for British military operations across Asia—and Southern armies were used very early in Ceylon (1800), Java (1811–15) and Burma (1822–24).[106] Without the support—of cash, arms and personnel—coming out of the Indian Empire, it can seriously be asked whether industrial Britain would have had the means to establish its political dominance over two-fifths of the world in the nineteenth century and to have enforced the Pax Britannica so vital to its own economic success. But providing those means—which arose out of the processes of 'military fiscalism' developing in the Indian state in the eighteenth century—also meant

[104] On the tendency of the *ryotwari* system to drive good land out of commission and to undermine investment strategies, see Nilmani Mukherjee, *The Ryotwari System in Madras* (Calcutta, 1962).

[105] Washbrook, 'Economic Depression'.

[106] Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon* (London, 1995).

that British-Indian 'governance' in the nineteenth century would never be able to emancipate itself from their origins. The colonial state in India would long remain an antique, pumping out revenue and soldiers to serve British military purposes even at the expense of internal economic paralysis.

The ultimate use to which Britain put its Indian Empire may also call for some re-appraisal of the character and origins of the 'colonial' relationship with India. From Britain's perspective, it was never simply conceived in bilateral terms but, rather, as part (and a very distinctive part) of a wider imperial system. But, from India's perspective, it was politically essential that bilateralism be imposed. The Company's orientation towards monopoly meant that it was always keen to eliminate South India's contacts with other foreign powers and one of the major effects of its 'triumph' was to reduce—if never entirely—that social and cultural pluralism, which had been so marked a feature of the early modern period.

As late as 1750, the region was still wide open: networks of 'trade and civilization' linking it to Arabia, the Levant and the Persian Gulf and to South-East Asia as well as to many different European powers. By 1850, although residues of this rich past still existed, they had lost much of their former glory. French and Dutch diplomatic missions might still provide alternative links to Europe but scarcely of the kind which had seen Revolutionary France arming 'Citoyen Tipu' or the Dutch in Ceylon financing the rebellion against English rule of the Tamil hero Kattaboman Nayak. Equally, although relations with Arabia and south-east Asia persisted, they tended to be of a humbler[107] type—at least until expanding Indo-British power opened up new opportunities later in the century. A major effect of the rise of the Company—and perhaps one of the key meanings of colonialism in South India—was the closure of broader lines of communication which, even when they were restored later on, were never of the same kind and arose from more limited bases within Indian society. Colonial rule reduced South India's links with the rest of the world: forcing it either to turn in on itself (as a sedentarized, 'indigenous' society[108]) or else to view itself in an exclusively British mirror, which reflected standards

[107] Mainly of migrant labour although, from the 1860s, new opportunities began to open out for capital investment in Burma and for the export of traders and professionals to many countries around the Indian Ocean littoral.

[108] This is strongly brought out in Irschick, *Dialogue*, which takes the desirability of 'sedentarization' as a common theme between British officials and Tamil elites.

of similarity and difference in starkly bipolar ways. It must be one of the great ironies of contemporary scholarship that post-colonial theory—by taking this binary relation/opposition as central—should re-validate one of colonialism's most strategic illusions.

But that the British should have been able to create this illusion so early in the colonial period also must raise questions about the real sources of their power and, perhaps, the real 'difference' which their conquest brought to South India. Viewed exclusively *from land*, the chance nature of the English Company's conquest appears paramount—which, in 1782 for example, nearly ended in disaster at the hands of Hyder Ali. But viewed *from the sea* and in wider perspective, it is very much less so. Hyder Ali ultimately failed to throw out the English because he was dependent on the co-operation of a French fleet, which failed to arrive.[109] For more than a decade previously, he had planned to build a commercial port at Mangalore and to develop his own fleet.[110] This reflected his undoubtedly correct perception that European power was, above all, sea-borne and—given the increasing dependence of Indian state systems on commerce—would strangle Indian sovereignty unless it was contested. But few of Hyder's Indian contemporaries shared his perception and joined him in contesting the sea. As a result, once the English had defeated their sea-borne European rivals and turned to internal state-building, there was something inexorable about their success.

The significance of the sea lay everywhere in the Company's rise to power on land in South India. It subdued its local opponents less because it possessed superior arms than because its communications and logistical systems were better. It represented not one army or state on the sub-continent but three: which could, on occasion, link themselves together and even—if not very frequently—draw reinforcements of cash and soldiers from Britain. Sea-power also enabled it (and the Europeans more generally) to dominate India's long-distance trade routes and the sources of its specie supplies. Of course, this sea-borne power could not translate itself into state power without the co-operation of many Indians on land: merchants who supplied its products; bankers who helped to finance it; princes who utilized its commercial services or 'contracted' for its soldiers; later, landowners and *zemindars*, who basked in the security which it provided to their rights. But the singularity of its position at sea—once its

[109] Dodwell, *Shorter History*, pp. 589–90.
[110] Guha, *Pre-British*.

European rivals had been defeated—ultimately guaranteed that many of these would come running for want of any alternative.

If we are seeking 'difference' between European and Indian cultures in the early modern period, its most obvious point lies at the shoreline. From the time of the Portuguese, the Europeans sought to 'arm the sea' in ways wholly novel to India where sea-borne trade had long been 'free' and largely detached from political power. Of course, on land this was by no means entirely the case: 'portfolio capitalism' spread through the post-Mughal states, whose internal economic policies developed strong elements of mercantilism. The old idea of a complete separation between trade and statecraft in pre-colonial India is no longer tenable. But, if Indian regimes paid some attention to the relationship between power and profit on land, they very much neglected the issue at sea—leaving it to the Europeans, and ultimately the English, to impose a stranglehold on vital areas of their commerce.

Moreover, the nature of this stranglehold was extremely tight. Even from the time of the Portuguese, there was a ruthlessness in the nexus surmised between profit and power, which had little Indian counterpart, and which was pursued through forms of mercantilism which required—even if they did not always get—highly systematic forms of organization and bureaucracy.[111] The nature of these forms—as developed by the English Company in the late eighteenth century—may provide important clues to the character of early colonial rule.

Familiarly, in Indian historiography, the British are held to have possessed a very different, and much more centralized, theory of the state than any to be found in India, which favoured ideologies of shared sovereignty and the recognition of domains of autonomy. And, certainly, there can be no doubt that Company rule offered a far more bureaucratic system of rule than anything which South India had experienced before. But there remain questions about where this centralized vision of the state can have come from: for it did not simply replicate established British state convention where the power of the Crown faced checks from constitutional and common law 'liberties' and where bureaucracy was weakly developed.

While John Brewer has gone far in overcoming the view that eighteenth-century England did not really have 'a state' and in showing the strength of Georgian military fiscalism, his findings

[111] On the Portuguese see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700* (London, 1993).

may need to be treated with caution.[112] He argued that Georgian England had a stronger military fiscal state than any of its European contemporaries—not that it was a proto-modern state.[113] In fact, the major trends in British historiography have been to confirm the 'antique' (custom- and patronage-based) character of the systems of both state administration and law in England until well into the nineteenth century.[114] Indeed, the British state 'revolution' of the mid-nineteenth century now—and paradoxically—tends to be seen, at least partly, as the result of the importation of ideas and institutions first forged in the Indian Empire.[115] But, if the Company did not simply transpose to India a model of the centralized state already-made, where did it get it from and what ideas guided its development?

Here, perhaps, we may need to look more directly at the Company's corporate organization. Remarkably, given the condition of communications, it ran a world-wide business empire and, at least theoretically (and whatever its men-on-the-spot might actually have done), ran it under extremely centrist forms of authority, regularly dismissing local agents and even recalling presidency governors. This was not least because, as derived from its Crown charter, it exercised quasi-royal forms of authority. Further, it ran its empire of trade in close association with the British navy: giving it quasi-military forms of authority, which became ever more strongly developed in the context of the wars with France.[116]

Historians have been inclined to look at the Company's processes of state construction in India, from the time of Cornwallis, in terms of the attempt to separate 'civil governance' from the functions of 'trade' and 'war'. But the key to their novelty may have been the extent to which they did not—but rather carried the traditions of armed corporate mercantilism directly into the business of the state. 'Company' India was always, and to the end, an armed company—looking to protect its revenues and monopoly rights (whose proceeds it largely spent on the military) from competitors, including 'private' Englishmen. It utilized military force to collect taxes and to garner the

[112] John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power* (London, 1989).
[113] *Pace* Sen, *Free Trade*, pp. 127–30.
[114] David Skuy, 'Macaulay and the Indian Penal Code: The Myth of the Inherent Superiority of the English Legal System Compared to India's Legal System in the Nineteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXXII:3, (1998), pp. 513–57.
[115] For example, the role of Charles Trevelyan in the Northcote–Trevelyan reforms which introduced the 'modern' civil service into Britain.
[116] C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian* (London, 1989).

profits of monopolies; and it made the honouring of debt (to itself) the first call on all property resources.[117] In its earliest days, it may have critiqued the Oriental Despotism, which it imagined the Indian rulers surrounding it to effect. But, once it began to acquire power for itself, this Despotism proved attractive—providing convenient theoretical cover for it to sustain its established institutional practices into the new context of 'colonial' rule. The Company ran a state in India, which never shook off the principles of armed corporate mercantilism—and which carried the political history of capitalism into a new dimension.

And that history impacted on South Indian society in one very direct way. While debates in early colonial political theory have concentrated on the relations between 'property' and 'the state', they appear rather inconclusive—at least, when the changes within India itself in the eighteenth century are taken on board. In practice, the Company had little choice but to carry on many existing 'revenue' conventions (even, it would seem, with regard to the famed Permanent Settlement[118])—albeit that it now administered them much more systematically. And, in theory, older ideas that it introduced sharp structural changes—as in the Weberian formulation of a shift from relations of status to those of contract—appear too stark and to beg as many questions about the society of nineteenth-century Britain as of eighteenth-century India. But, as Prasannan Parthasarathi has seen, if political theory is conceived also to embrace the relations between property and labour, one very clear 'difference' between British and South Indian conventions stands out and marks one of the most obvious interventions represented by the 'colonial' factor.[119]

As a mercantilist corporation—with ever more explicit military functions—the Company, of course, made use of every available form of coerced labour, which it found in South India. *Pace* Gyan Prakash,[120] it betrayed no initiative to 'free' labour in most regards and even managed to postpone the metropolitanly-ordered abolition of slavery for more than a decade. However, in one way it did possess from the first a novel attitude towards labour. Hardly surprisingly, given not only its own interests but the history of labour relations in the contemporary Britain whence it came, it was inherently hostile to the idea that labour possessed its own 'rights' in the social product or might

[117] Washbrook, 'Law, State'.
[118] Wilson, 'Governing Property'.
[119] Parthasarathi, *Transition*.
[120] Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories* (Cambridge, 1990).

enjoy corporate forms of protection. But such ideas had been basic to the context of Southern labour relations previously, even informing indigenous institutions of 'slavery' (*adimai*).[121]

From the early eighteenth century, the Company had sought to establish a monopoly position in the textile market from which it could reduce labour to a simple factor of production. And this attitude was subsequently passed onto the nascent bureaucracy and law courts which, however sensitive they might be towards the 'historic' rights of landed property, were inclined to disregard the claims (in terms of 'customary' shares in the product) made by labour. Undoubtedly, as Ravi Ahuja has argued, the changing land–man ratio in South India across the nineteenth century would have reduced the price of labour, and the status of labourers, in the long run.[122] But the elimination of legal rights to shares and protection—pursued by both the revenue bureaucracy and the law courts in spite of their own deep differences—considerably facilitated the process. If there was one very clear point of 'difference' between British and South Indian culture(s) at the moment of colonial transition, it was over the politico-legal status of labour. And the realization of the principles of armed corporate mercantilism through the Company state led to the progressive subordination of South Indian labour to the point where it—rather than any goods produced—would become the principal commodity drawn into the new world of industrial capitalism then beginning to form. While South India's own economy stagnated, a vast flow of labour emerged from it to service mines, plantations and factories from Fiji to the Caribbean.

South Indian society, then, was hardly untouched by the forces of British imperialism even in the early phases of 'colonial' rule. However, the nature of their impact only very partially accords with the anticipations of post-colonial theory. Full exposure to Modernity was limited and, while vulnerability to 'white' domination undoubtedly increased, it was off-set by fragilities—and internal contradictions—in the relations through which power was articulated. More noticeably, the colonial state functioned by incorporating an eclectic selection of local elite groups, whose position in relation to the rest of society was thereby transformed and enhanced. This transformation functioned by sliding the bases of elite authority towards forms of ascription, which were more difficult to contest and less open to social competition. But

[121] Ahuja, 'Labour Relations'.
[122] Ahuja, 'Labour Relations'.

the price of 'traditionalizing' India had also to be paid. In the South, 'local' cultures tended to become more isolated and 'indigenized', turned in on themselves; local society was shifted in the direction of sedentarization and peasantization; local economies underwent processes of 'structural adjustment', which made rent more important than profit. In effect, Southern society became frozen into a series neo-traditional forms—which were maintained across the nineteenth century largely by reducing labour's share in the social product and transferring it to groups elsewhere, both in Britain and in India.